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ABSTRACT

This short paper describes the Parent Readiness Education Project (PREP), a successful innovative effort to ameliorate the deficiencies of preschool children by training parents to enrich their home environment and improve interactions with their children through a specific program of daily home activities. PREP identifies 4-year-old children with a high risk of school failure and plans a program of home intervention, using the mother as the change agent. High school students also work with the 4-year-olds and receive training for their future roles as parents. The beneficial aspects of the program are ubiquitous: the family unit is enhanced by the increased skills of the parents; learning problems are ameliorated or prevented, younger children in the family benefit; future parents are given good foundations for parenthood, and school-community relations are improved. Research and evaluation indicate a high rate of success and effectiveness, and the cost of this program is within the low to moderate range. (Author/CS)

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A UNIQUE APPROACH TO PROGRAMMING FOR THE PRESCHOOL CHILD

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A UNIQUE APPROACH TO PROGRAMMING FOR THE PRESCHOOL CHILD

Diane K. Bert, Project Director

The Parent Readiness Education Project is a successful innovative effort to ameliorate the deficiencies of preschool children through training parents to become change agents and enrich their home environment and interactions with their children through a specific program of daily home activities.

Statement of the Problem

Working as School Psychologists in the Redford Union School District, a small suburb adjacent to Detroit, Michigan, we became increasingly concerned about the numbers of children arriving at school at age 5 unable to cope with the demands of the educational environment. Many children who enter kindergarten lack visual motor development, listening and language skills and environmental experiences necessary for successful academic progress. Some attempts at summer remedial programs in Redford Union sponsored by Title I funds did not prove effective and emphasized the need for earlier intervention, before the child had experienced the trauma of failure in school.

Research indicated that we were not alone in facing this problem and suggested the need to provide a more enriched environment in the home prior to school entrance. Karnes et al. acknowledged the need to work with mothers. Parents potentially influence the child's total experience both inside and outside the home in relationships, language, interests, and task oriented behaviors.

Redford Union is an all white, lower middle class community. Many young families settle here who attended school in this community. Currently the school population is about 10,500 students which includes 3 parochial schools. From innumerable meetings and conferences with members of the community it became apparent that they lacked the knowledge and skill to provide appropriate and meaningful experiences for their preschool children and would willingly follow a planned schedule if leadership were provided. It had also been brought to our attention through a series of meetings with high school students that they felt totally unprepared to meet their responsibility as effective parents in the future.

The Parent Readiness Education Project (PREP), currently in its second year of operation, was developed in an effort to meet these needs. It was one of 26 projects in Michigan to receive ESEA Title III funds as an innovative, unique, exemplary model program. PREP has been replicated by another school district, received nationwide attention in the "President's National Advisory Council Notes" and is participating in a Validation study of outstanding innovative educational practices sponsored by the United States Office of Education.

PREP is a program with three major goals:
1. To identify preschool children with potential learning problems and develop a plan of intervention.
2. To teach parents how to develop in their children the skills necessary for future academic achievement through specific activities and an enriched environment.
3. To train high school students for their future roles as parents through practical experiences in working with preschool children.

Subjects Used

All four-year old children in the school district were tested in the fall prior to their eligibility for entrance to kindergarten. (In Michigan children may enter kindergarten if they are five or will be by December 1st.) The first year 402 were tested, the second year 389. Experienced teachers were trained to administer the battery of tests which consisted of the Cooperative Preschool Inventory, and selected items from deHirsch and Kephart which were appropriate for four-year olds.

Those children who scored below the twenty-fifth percentile, were found to have short attention spans, speech problems, difficulty in following directions, who did not know their last names or more than 3 colors, who could not draw a circle or a human figure at the four-year level were considered to be eligible for the program. Priority was given to those who had younger siblings. The first year 40 children were selected, the second year 48, whose parents agreed to participate. A matched group showing similar difficulties was used as a control group.

Ten high school students the first year and twelve the second, were enrolled in an elective course for credit in Child Development and assisted with individual preschool children daily. Non-college bound students were particularly encouraged to participate and the course was open to both boys and girls.

The PREP staff consists of one full time director, two half time teachers who alternate in working with parents and children, evaluators, a secretary, teacher aide, part-time Social Workers and other supportive personnel are available on a consultive basis.

Procedures

The children selected for the program were divided into 4 groups. Each child and his mother (or father in some cases) attend class one morning a week, Monday through Thursday, for 2 hours. The children are provided an intensive program emphasizing expressive language, visual and auditory skill development, coordination abilities and improved self awareness and self concept.

During the first hour of the session parents observe the activities through a one-way screen with explanation provided by one

teacher. She meets with them during the second hour to discuss the activities, prepare materials for home use and give instruction for carrying out the 6 daily home activities. All home activities are planned for developing skills in children, enriching the home environment, and helping parents develop effective techniques for dealing with their children. Home activities are limited to 10 minutes a day and materials used are always available household items or games made by the parents. Parents are encouraged to be innovative and expand these activities. Daily comments are required.

Evening group sessions with a social worker are available for discussing family problems, attitudes and behavioral techniques. These are provided on a voluntary basis and about 60% of the parents participated.

Starting with the second semester at the end of January, the high school students are introduced into the program. Each is assigned to one specific youngster per day, is informed of his special needs and instructed as to the type of material best suited to improving skills. Each student keeps a log of interactions and observations of each youngster. Friday mornings the high school students meet with both teachers to discuss general child development, management techniques and the progress of skill development for each preschool child.

Beginning with the second year all kindergarten teachers in the school district participated in a series of workshops, covering such topics as identifying learning disabilities in the classroom, some techniques for remediation and prescriptive programming and methods of helping parents learn to provide more enriched home environment for all school children.

Results

At the conclusion of the twenty-seven week experience in the Parent Readiness Education Project the preschool participants and control group were post-tested with the Caldwell Cooperative Preschool Inventory. This instrument in its present form is sensitive to learning experience and, therefore, may well be used as a device to measure change or growth in a preschool child who has been involved in a plan of educational intervention. The pre-test and post-test scores of the Experimental and Control Groups were analyzed.

Experimental Group		Control Group	
Pre-test:	October, 1971	Pre-test:	October, 1971
Number	40	Number:	40
Average:	24.35	Average:	24.95
Variance:	47.85	Variance:	49.28
Post-test:	May, 1972	Post-test:	May, 1972
Number:	40	Number:	40
Average:	49.92	Average:	40.2
Variance:	24.4	Variance:	88.32

Level of Statistical Significance: .005

Considering all data gathered and the results of the analysis it is safe to conclude that on the basis of the Caldwell data, there is an excellent net effect in favor of the Experimental Group which was subjected to the treatment prescribed in the project design.

Extensive pre, mid, and final process tests were also administered to the Experimental Group to measure visual and auditory skills, coordination, language concepts, and Draw A Man. Significant gains were demonstrated in all areas and behavioral objectives were met.

An openended project evaluation instrument was developed by the Project Director and evaluators to measure comprehension and application of major project goals and techniques by the mothers of participants. The mothers were asked to describe learning concepts they could develop in their children while involved in everyday living experiences, how to utilize home materials as learning tools and to list several ways in which parents can encourage the development of language skills. The results showed a good understanding by the mothers of project goals and techniques and their ability to apply these techniques in appropriate situations. The achievement gains of the preschool children are primarily attributable to the work of the mothers through the home activities.

Throughout their daily contacts with the preschool children the high school students demonstrated skills in interacting with young children in an ameliorative fashion. The discussion in their seminars revealed increased understanding of early childhood development.

Discussion

The PREP design was successful in meeting the major objectives as demonstrated by both hard and soft evaluation data. The children made significant gains in readiness skill areas: visual and auditory discrimination, perception, and memory, large and small motor skills, expressive language, and conceptual skills. The children developed confidence in themselves and parent-child relationships were strengthened. The parents became more aware of their child's abilities, individual needs, and ways of presenting learning tasks. Supportive interactions occurred between parents. Many mothers

showed growth in self confidence and self actualization.

Conclusion

PREP has demonstrated that parents will be able to stimulate and enrich the home environment when specific direction is provided, and help to improve readiness skills in preschool children. It is still too soon to determine the long range effects of this improvement after the child enters school, but comparison on the Metropolitan Readiness Test will be available in May 1973, after the first PREP group completes a year in kindergarten.

It may not be possible to do adequate long range follow-up studies of the high school students, but contact with them will be maintained. To date none have become parents.

PREP offers a good model for replication in other school districts which experience the ubiquitous problem of meeting the needs of children of parents who are unable to provide adequate foundations for academic success.

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